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The History of Latin American Studies: From United Fruit's Pet to Mainstay Program

Part 1

The history of Latin American Studies (LAS)—today, Latin American, Carribean, and Latinx Studies (LACLAS) at Bowdoin—is longer and more fraught than any other area study. While the broader field of “area studies” emerged in the mid-twentieth century, LAS had already taken root decades prior.¹ Initial funding for academic research for programs at universities came from wealthy donors, typically with business interests in Latin America. However, the proper emergence and proliferation of LAS programs did not take place until the end of World War II/the outset of the Cold War. With increased concerns about “spheres of influence” and the spread of communism, the U.S. government greatly expanded its interest and support of area studies—and particularly LAS. This establishment-driven, United States-centric approach to LAS persisted for the duration of the Cold War era. With the fall of the Berlin Wall came a reformation of sorts for Latin American studies, creating a “decentralized,” multidisciplinary iteration of the field that we are most familiar with today.

We can trace the beginnings of current Latin American Studies to as early as the 1920s, but Latino higher education dates back even further. As far back as 1851, there is record of *Californio* students in California attending Santa Clara College.² These colleges educated

¹ Sonia E. Alvarez, Arturo Arias, Charles R. Hale, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies.” *Cultural Anthropology*, 26, no. 2 (May 2011), 229. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41238322?seq=1>

² Christopher Tudico, “Before We Were Chicanas/os: The Mexican American Experience in California Higher Education, 1848-1945,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2010: Chapter 2: “Californios Go to College: The Story of Jesús María Estudillo and Santa Clara College,” 57.

wealthier *Californios* who sought to use their education as method of protecting their family fortunes. According to author Christopher Tudico, “By attending college, Californio families believed their sons would be better prepared to defend against the growing encroachment on Californio life.”³ Despite the presence of these students, there is no evidence that the curriculum itself at Santa Clara College reflected the interests and experiences of Mexican (or Latin) Americans.

Two decades after the Cuban–Spanish–American war, the first proper LAS programs began to emerge, mostly in the Southern United States.⁴ These programs were reflective of the wealthy, white American interests that funded them. Professors Sonia E. Alvarez, Arturo Arias, and Charles Hale argue in their essay titled “Re-visioning Latin American Studies” that “research and knowledge production in LAS [was] U.S.-centric, carried out under the hegemony of most white, northern scholars and dominated by a few disciplines.”⁵ One need look no further than the oldest LAS program in the United States, Tulane’s Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies, to find evidence of this trend—and more. The center was financed by a gift from Sam Zemurray, the founder and president of the Cuyamel Fruit Company, the forerunner of the infamous United Fruit Company (UFC).⁶ The implications of this are not lost on students of Latin American history; the UFC was directly responsible for some of the most horrific events across Central and South American during the 20th century.

Many additional LAS programs were founded in the ensuing decades, providing a distinctly United States-centric, superior perspective on Latin America to college students across the United States. According to political economist Ronald Chilcotte, “North American

³ Tudico, “Before We Were Chicanas,” 65.

⁴ Alvarez, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies,” 229.

⁵ Alvarez, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies,” 235.

⁶ Alvarez, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies,” 229.

historians and social scientists and U.S. policy makers projected their ideas about a common past and a common future on the region as a whole but at the same time distinguished the United States as democratic, virtuous, and developed in contrast to Latin America as corrupt, immoral, undemocratic, and underdeveloped and therefore as justifying efforts to bolster U.S. hegemony in the region.”⁷ Chilcote further argues that this imperialist outlook impacted academic study at institutions like the Stone Center at Tulane, and produced a conclusion that “problems of the South would be resolved through capitalist modernization.”⁸ More LAS programs were announced as area studies boomed in the 1950s and 1960s, and the United States-centric, capitalist approach to LAS persisted.⁹ The federal government, interested in expanding its influence in Latin America, provided significant funding for (noncontroversial) academic research, further manipulating the perspective of LAS scholars.¹⁰ However, as the 1960s approached, matters began to shift.

The political turmoil of the 1960s as well as newly available money for research travel contributed to a substantial increase of American graduate students visiting and studying in Latin America.¹¹ According to Alvarez et al., these trips “radicalized many students, who, on their return, threw their energies in support of popular struggles throughout the hemisphere before obtaining their graduate degrees and initiating academic careers in the 1970s.”¹² The institutions at the vanguard of this trend were typically in the Western and Southwestern United States. At Stanford, Professor Ronald Hilton developed a Hispanic American and Luso-Brazilian Studies program that emphasized an interdisciplinary approach to LAS, language training, and

⁷ Ronald H. Chilcote, “The Cold War and the Transformation of Latin American Studies in the United States,” *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 4 (2018): 8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48568116>.

⁸ Chilcote, “The Cold War,” 8.

⁹ Alvarez, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies,” 229.

¹⁰ Chilcote, “The Cold War,” 10.

¹¹ Alvarez, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies,” 230.

¹² Alvarez, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies,” 230.

immersion and fieldwork in Latin America.¹³ While Hilton's program is reminiscent of modern LAS programs, it was not until decades later that this style began to proliferate. This was in large part due to the United States government's retaliation against academics who went against their wishes. Professor Timothy Harding was deemed "un-American" by U.S. security agencies for his work with leftists in Brazil, and the FBI prevented him from receiving multiple jobs in academia.¹⁴

Despite the persecution of individuals like Harding, younger, more activist-inclined academics began to assert themselves in the field. Thus, Latin American Studies began to shift away from relying exclusively on American and imperialist perspectives. With the creation of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in 1966, scholars set in motion the very beginnings of a nearly three-decade process of decentering Latin American studies.¹⁵ Though the first conference of LASA featured only approximately 200 attendees, today the organization counts over 13,000 members, with more than 60% residing outside the United States.^{16 17} The process of decentering LAS (from the United States) was accelerated with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing reshuffling of the global political order. But what does it mean to "decenter" Latin American Studies? Alvarez et al. argue this process "necessarily entail[ed] challenging its Anglo-Eurocentered assumptions, more fully incorporating scholars and subaltern knowledge producers from both the North and the South, and expanding its transdisciplinary reach."¹⁸ In shifting away from the Cold War's notion of the "Three Worlds," the decentering of LAS necessarily required "resignifying LAS under conditions of globalization."¹⁹

¹³ Chilcote, "The Cold War," 19.

¹⁴ Chilcote, "The Cold War," 19.

¹⁵ Chilcote, "The Cold War," 26.

¹⁶ Chilcote, "The Cold War," 26.

¹⁷ "About LASA," Latin American Studies Association. <https://lasaweb.org/en/about/>

¹⁸ Alvarez, "Re-Visioning Latin American Studies," 235.

¹⁹ Alvarez, "Re-Visioning Latin American Studies," 231.

The history of LAS in the United States can be traced back over a century, though the nature and scope of the program has shifted substantially over the last 100 years. What began as an area of study funded by the American capitalist magnates who exploited Latin America for their own political gain eventually became a multidisciplinary, “decentered” field of study that incorporates a variety of opinions and perspectives. The shift in LAS in the United States is perhaps indicative of how closely tied academia can be to the political establishment. Though it may be disturbing to realize, it is only when the political impetus for maintaining a strong influence over Latin America waned that the style of LAS first introduced at Stanford began to truly germinate.

Part 2

The history of the LACLAS program at Bowdoin dates back to its introduction as a minor in 1989, though the College’s relationship with the study of Latin America can be traced even further. What began as a minor that exclusively offered courses cross-listed with other departments is now a major with two full-time associate professors, a program director and coordinator, ten additional faculty members who also work in other departments, in addition to a variety of professors who teach the 25+ LACLAS courses offered per semester.²⁰ Because the program was established around the time of the LAS decentering process in the late 1980s and 1990s, it began with stated objectives and learning styles similar to the current iteration of LACLAS at Bowdoin. The most significant point of contention and area of development for the program at Bowdoin was not “re-visioning” the department’s pedagogy and style, but rather expanding and diversifying its faculty hires, possible disciplines for study, and course offerings.

²⁰ Bowdoin College Course Catalog (2021-22), 278.

Before examining the LACLAS program itself, it is worth acknowledging some of the early courses about Latin America offered at Bowdoin. Surprisingly, in the 1940-1941 academic year, Bowdoin hosted a visiting professor, Ernesto Montenegro, a lecturer from the National University of Chile, who taught a Government course entitled “Latin American Relations.”²¹ While there is no class description provided, I am curious to learn whether Montenegro, a South American, would have instructed the course from his own Latin American perspective or instead applied a United States-centric view. Latin American studies next appear in the 1963-64 academic year, when Professor Daniel Levine began teaching “History of Latin America.”²² Otherwise, mentions of Latin America in the course catalog are sparse for the next two decades.

It was not until the arrival of erstwhile history department chair Allen Wells in 1988 that multiple courses focused on Latin America were offered by departments other than Spanish. Wells’ first year at the college, perhaps not incidentally, was the year before the introduction of the LAS minor. And less than two years after his arrival, Wells received a tenured professorship.²³ The first four courses Wells taught at Bowdoin help elucidate the approach to Latin America taken at Bowdoin—in the history department at least. His Modern Latin America course description from 1988 stated: “An important segment of this course will trace the roots of revolutionary discontent in Latin America, *from a Latin American, as well as a North American perspective.*”²⁴ Similarly, Wells’ Latin American Revolutions blurb from the same year explained, “We will challenge popular images and orthodox interpretations and test a variety of new propositions about these revolutionary processes. External and internal dimensions of each social movement will be analyzed, and each revolutionary process will be discussed in the full

²¹ Bowdoin College Course Catalog (1941-1942), 76.

²² Bowdoin College Course Catalog (1963-1964), 127.

²³ “Six professors promoted to associate professor with tenure,” *The Bowdoin Orient*, April 6, 1990.

²⁴ Bowdoin College Course Catalog (1988-1989), 186.

context of that country's historical development."²⁵ Even before the creation of the LAS department, Wells was teaching in a style aligned with LAS instructors across the country. By discussing each revolution in the "full context" of the nation's history, Wells promoted a non United States-centric approach. Similarly, through examining revolutionary discontent from both North America and Latin American perspectives, he provided students with a diversity of opinions and interpretations of Latin America.

When the Latin American Studies minor was officially introduced the following fall of 1989, the initial description of the program directly reflected the post-Cold War approach to LAS. The 1989-1990 course catalog describes the program as follows: "Latin American Studies is an integrated interdisciplinary program that explores the cultural heritage of Mesoamerica, the Caribbean, and the South American continent. This multi-disciplinary approach is complemented by a concentration in a specific discipline."²⁶ It is important to note LAS' early commitment to being an interdisciplinary field, something still evident today. In fact, the 2021-22 course catalog includes a startling similar description of the program: "Its multidisciplinary approach is designed to integrate the scholarly methods and perspectives of several disciplines in order to foster increased understanding of Latin America's social differences and economic realities, cultural diversity, transnational connections, historical trajectories, and range of popular culture and artistic and literary expression."²⁷ Of course, the modern iteration is more specific and descriptive as a result of the program's expansion in the past thirty years.

The transformation that took place in the Latin American studies program at Bowdoin from 1989 to the present was much less about changing methods or goals than growing and

²⁵ Bowdoin College Course Catalog 1988-1989, 190.

²⁶ Bowdoin College Course Catalog 1989-1990, 176.

²⁷ Bowdoin College Course Catalog (2021-22), 278.

diversifying the program by hiring new faculty and expanding the number of disciplines that courses could be offered in. These very desires among the LAS faculty were elucidated in a November 1992 letter sent by Professor John Turner, the first chair of the LAS program, to then College president, Robert Edwards. Turner explained that he was writing out of concern for “a program that feels that it ought to be closer to the heart of Bowdoin than it can feel at present.”²⁸ He suggested that “Central to making Latin American Studies more important at Bowdoin is the hiring in departments, other than History and Romance Languages, of teachers and scholars who work in that area of the world. A related issue is that someone like Nat Wheelwright, whose research is in the Latin American rain forest, cannot take the time from the courses he must teach to be able to offer a regular course in that subject.”²⁹ Despite the establishment of the LAS minor three years previous, Turner argued that Bowdoin ignored Latin America—as well as Latinos in America—in its curriculum. “The growing number of Latino students on campus (growing by our design and rightly so) are confronted by a curriculum that pays scant attention to Spanish speaking America, and none at all to the Spanish speaking culture of this country.”³⁰ Turner mentioned the LAS’s measly \$1,000 annual operating budget, saying it imposes “real limits” on what the department can do.³¹

Although the response to Turner’s letter was gradual, it is hard to dispute that most of his concerns have since been ameliorated. A handwritten letter—sent by Chuck Beatty³² to Edwards—addressing Turner’s letter states, “John is correct ... that the right thing to do is to tilt replacement hires toward Latin American studies where it makes curricular sense — e.g., in

²⁸ John Turner, Letter to Robert H. Edwards, Brunswick, Maine, November 3, 1992. (3.42 Box 1)

²⁹ John Turner, Letter to Robert H. Edwards, Brunswick, Maine, November 3, 1992. (3.42 Box 1)

³⁰ John Turner, Letter to Robert H. Edwards, Brunswick, Maine, November 3, 1992. (3.42 Box 1)

³¹ John Turner, Letter to Robert H. Edwards, Brunswick, Maine, November 3, 1992. (3.42 Box 1)

³² I could not verify if Chuck Beatty was an employee of the College or simply a friend of Edwards.

history, gov't, Econ (maybe), sociology/ anthropology.”³³ Edwards responds to Beatty—though the archive included no record of his response to Turner—by mentioning a “huge to-do” at Carleton College when a retiring history professor was to be replaced by a specialist in Latin America.³⁴ This exchange demonstrates that the administration, as well as professors, understood that expanding the LAS department was as much a question of diversifying faculty hires as anything else. Though the archive (and the *Bowdoin Orient*) include little mention of LAS during the rest of the 1990s, by 2001 demand had grown to the extent where LAS became a major.

During the April 9, 2001 faculty meeting, the Latin American Studies major was officially approved, with a recommendation from the Committee on Curriculum and Educational Policy.³⁵ An *Orient* article from that week notes that because students previously interested in majoring in LAS needed to petition the Recording Committee, “only about two to three students self-designed such majors a year. With the requirements for a degree in Latin American Studies now specifically outlined, many of the faculty said they hoped that more interested students would fulfill this major.”³⁶

The following week’s *Orient* contains a more detailed account of the process of LAS becoming a major. The writer, James Fisher, interviewed all faculty members in the department. Turner explained that since the early 1990s he—alongside Wells and Professor Janice Jaffe—“began to realize that we had students in common, between history and literature” who were mainly interested in issues concerning Latin America.³⁷ However, the department did not have requisite faculty to become a major yet—needing at least three tenure track professors. “We’ve

³³ Chuck Beatty, Letter to Robert H. Edwards, Brunswick, Maine, January 21, 1993. (3.42 Box 1)

³⁴ Robert H. Edwards, Letter to Chuck Beatty, Brunswick, Maine, January 24, 1993. (3.42 Box 1)

³⁵ Bowdoin College Faculty Meeting Minutes (Sep 2000 - May 2001). (A01.07.02, Box 1, Folder 7)

³⁶ Nellie-Kate Jordan, “Faculty approves Thanksgiving, Latin American Studies Major,” *The Bowdoin Orient*, April 13, 2001.

³⁷ James Fisher, “Latin American Studies enters big leagues,” *The Bowdoin Orient*, April 20, 2001.

always had students interested,' Wells said, 'and we've always had a minor ... but we never had enough staff to support a major until recently.'"³⁸ Turner added that peer institutions' prior creations of LAS majors left Bowdoin behind, saying "'We were somewhat behind, and that was one of the arguments for the major.'"³⁹ Professor Enrique Yepes—who later chaired the department—wished for the appointment of a Latin American Studies faculty member in the future.⁴⁰

Yepes' wishes have since been achieved. The June 2009 Latin American Studies Newsletter details some of the developments during the first decade of the major. In Yepes opening remarks as director of LAS, he notes, "The program has expanded considerably, now offering courses in a variety of disciplines, including Africana studies, Anthropology, Art History, Economics, Environmental Studies, French, History, Music, Sociology, and Spanish. When the major was approved in 2000 we were averaging approximately 230 students per academic year in our courses. Over the last few years, enrollments have more than doubled. Similarly, faculty contributing to our program has soared from eight to eighteen in 2008-09."⁴¹ In 1989, when the minor began, there were five course offerings in Spanish, ten in History, and a single each in Government and English. During the 2021-22 academic year, the LACLAS department offered courses in eleven departments, one more than in 2009. While Bowdoin's LAS program has not undergone a "re-visioning" process, it has grown substantially and made substantial progress towards diversifying course offerings and expanding the scope of the program's interdisciplinary nature.

³⁸ Fisher, "Latin American Studies enters big leagues,"

³⁹ Fisher, "Latin American Studies enters big leagues,"

⁴⁰ Fisher, "Latin American Studies enters big leagues,"

⁴¹ Enrique Yepes, "A Note From the Director," The Latin American Studies Newsletter, Bowdoin College, June 2009, 1. (3.42 Box 1)